



Faculty of Cognitive Science and Human Development

**ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND GRADUATE
EMPLOYMENT: A CASE STUDY ON UNIMAS
GRADUATES OF AUGUST 2001**

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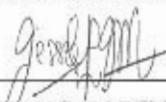
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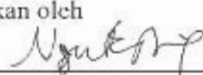
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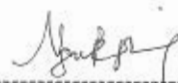
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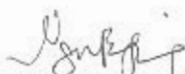
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ABSTRACT

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT: A CASE STUDY ON UNIMAS GRADUATES OF AUGUST 2001

Jessie Melling

Generally, this project aims to perform a preliminary investigation into factors that affect English proficiency among graduates and how it relates to graduate employment. Factors that could affect English proficiency in writing and reading skills were mother tongue language and secondary educational background of the respondents. The questionnaire and interview results show that English proficiency among those who had their secondary education (Form 1 to Form 5) in rural schools have weak writing and reading skills compared to those from urban schools. Hence, they are posed with problems of getting employed by organizations upon graduation. The needs to acquire proficiency in both writing and reading skills receives greater demands as organizations change and adjust to meet new competitive pressures. In this new millennium and the prosperity of Information Communication Technology (ICT) era, proficiency in both skills will mostly determine graduates' chances of either being employed or unemployed. The findings suggests that it is worthwhile to give greater emphasis to the teaching of English in oral, writing and reading in universities to prepare its students with enough skills once they graduate and enter the employment market.

ABSTRAK

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT: A CASE STUDY ON UNIMAS GRADUATES OF AUGUST 2001

Jessie Melling

Pada umumnya, projek ini bertujuan untuk melakukan penyiasatan awal terhadap faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi tahap kemahiran bahasa Inggeris para graduan dan hubungannya dalam pengambilan kerja di kalangan graduan. Faktor-faktor yang dikenali mempengaruhi tahap kemahiran bahasa Inggeris dalam penulisan dan bacaan adalah terdiri daripada faktor bahasa ibunda dan latarbelakang persekolahan menengah para responden. Keputusan daripada borang soal selidik dan temuduga menunjukkan bahawa tahap kemahiran bahasa Inggeris di kalangan mereka yang menerima persekolahan menengah (Tingkatan 1 hingga Tingkatan 5) di kawasan luar bandar adalah rendah berbanding dengan mereka yang bersekolah di kawasan bandar. Mereka yang lemah dalam penguasaan bahasa Inggeris adalah cenderung kepada masalah semasa pengambilan kerja oleh organisasi. Keperluan untuk menguasai kemahiran dalam penulisan dan bacaan telah menerima permintaan yang besar dalam sektor pekerjaan kerana keadaan organisasi yang kian berubah untuk memenuhi tekanan daripada persaingan baru. Di dalam abad millennia baru serta perkembangan era komunikasi informasi teknologi (ICT), tahap kemahiran dalam penulisan dan bacaan telah menjadi penentu kepada peluang sama ada diambil bekerja atau sebaliknya. Hasil dapatan yang diperolehi mencadangkan bahawa pentingnya pendedahan untuk mengajar bahasa Inggeris melalui kemahiran dalam berkomunikasi, menulis dan membaca di universiti sebagai persediaan kepada para pelajar yang akan bergraduat untuk memasuki alam pekerjaan nanti.

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Recently, calls have been made for graduates to be proficient in English language so that they can function effectively in the workplace. The importance of English is not just in how many people speak it but in what it is used for. English is the major language of news and information in the world. It is the language of business and government even in some countries where it is a minority language. It is true that the standard of English has deteriorated in the country, particularly Malaysia, a fact recognized by all and sundry including the Prime Minister himself. When Dr. Mahathir first brought up the subject, he was talking specifically of the Malays who do not know English at all or lack the proficiency in the language. He was disappointed that so many Malay graduates in the country are jobless and that most of the top positions in the international corporations operating in the country are held by other races who seem to be more proficient in English (Sir, 2002). The reasons for students choosing to continue their formal education are no doubt wide and varied, but common to all must be the expectation that their degree and development during their courses will enhance employability in the future.

Nevertheless, one of the seven fundamental reforms to be made in the existing education system would be to fully empower its workforce with good working competency in the knowledge of English, deemed the language of knowledge (Tan Sri Nordin Sopiee, 2002). English language covers a wide area, ranging from oral skills, writing skills and reading skills. Skills and qualities considered important in the recruitment and selection of graduates. The skills and qualities referred to as being important when recruiting and selecting a graduate were: oral and written communication skills. Oral and written communication skills were considered vital as everybody in the company has customer interface (Stewart., Knowles, 2000). Many of the skills needed to make people employable are specific to particular occupations. However, increasingly employers are defining a set of "generic", usually personal, skills which they seek when recruiting new employees. These "generic skills" include, for example, communication skills, the ability to apply basic literacy and numeracy in work situation, being a "team player", the ability to relate to responsibility and making decisions. Although these "generic skills" are not new needs in many workplaces, they do appear to be receiving greater emphasis as organizations change and adjust to meet new competitive pressures and developed new working practices (Dench, 1997).

1.2 Background Of The Study

This research is made based on the title of my research study, English Proficiency and Graduate Employment: A Case Study on UNIMAS Graduates of August 2001. This research aims to find out factors that affect English proficiency among graduates and how it relates to graduate employment.

The study will therefore focus on English proficiency and graduate employment as required by employers. This study will also try to reveal the correlation between respondent's mother tongue language and educational background with English proficiency that could be a contributing factor of "unemployability" or "employability" among graduates.

There are some who have argued that English should not be necessary to obtain a good job and rise up in the corporate ranks comparing Malaysia with industrial giants such as Japan and Germany. Therefore, this study tend to make graduates who failed to get themselves employed to realize that job opportunities always come along with language proficiency as it is the necessity or valued criteria in the eyes of employer (UTM Chancellor Sultanah Zanariah, 2002). It is also commented that companies are unable to employ local graduates due to their lack of empowerment in English language especially if they do not understand questions asked during an interview session (DPM, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 2002).

1.2.1 Area Of Coverage/Scope Of The Study

The area of coverage for this research was focused on local Kuching ex-graduates of August 2001, University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). To enable the finding of valuable information, the study also includes executives from different organizations around Kuching whom are selected for the interview session apart from the graduates whom are selected only for questionnaires distributions. To represent the data needed for the study, I have randomly chosen a total of 62 individuals (consisting of 52 UNIMAS local graduates and 10 executives from various organizations in Kuching). With a small number of sample selected, I will be able to collect accurate and reliable information from the respondents. Each of the respondents' opinions will represent the opinions of an overall UNIMAS graduates as well as the opinions from various organizations regarding English proficiency and graduate employment.

1.3 Statement Of The Research Problem

With regard to employment, English language is made one of the necessity requirements in most job application. In 1997, Sally found that the changing organizational structures, the development of a service economy and the consequent focus on customer service, a continual drive for quality and strong competition, as well as technological developments, have all helped to drive the importance of oral, writing and reading skills and other "personal skills" in employment. The study therefore will focus on English proficiency (writing skills and reading skills) among university students that could enable them to secure jobs with international companies.

This statement is supported by UTM Chancellor Sultanah Zanariah (Utusan Malaysia, 2002), said, "they should attempt to secure jobs at international companies so that they can acquire knowledge and know-how to help make them even more marketable in later years. To do so, proficiency in English is crucial as it is the language recognized and spoken worldwide".

In addition, the absence of English language in universities or particularly English language in lectures indeed discourages empowerment of English proficiencies. This situation will only continue to produce uncompetitive graduates with a step behind in a market which changes at a neck-breaking speed.

Harvey (1997) noted that there are large numbers of graduates looking for jobs and employers are no longer doing recruitment simply on the basis of degree status. A degree might be necessary or desirable but employers are looking for a range of other attributes when employing and retaining graduates". Likewise, Green (1990) acknowledged that various studies have produced useful indicators of the kinds of skills and abilities that graduates need in

employment that includes communication, writing and reading, team-working, problem solving, leadership, numeracy, self-confidence, willingness to learn and flexibility.

In the recent news, we read about the Ministry of Education stated that a large number of university graduates have problem in finding the right job. One of the reasons is their inadequate proficiency in English that contributes to the problem of "unemployability". The need to improve the standard of English among Malaysians in an increasingly globalised environment should be put into our awareness as English is by far the most common language used nowadays. A scholar once said: A man who is ignorant of foreign languages is ignorant of his own. We as Malaysians are proud of our own native language but it does not mean we have to ignore other languages beside our own. English is one way to communicate and we have to admit its importance in the working sector. Most people opt for English in doing some kind of business deals or interaction. Realizing its significant role, our young generation must not be left behind in acquiring the proficiency of English.

1.4 Objectives Of The Study

A study on ex UNIMAS local graduates of August 2001 was conducted to evaluate their English proficiency and its reliability in the employment sector. This study was also conducted among several employers in several organizations around Kuching to evaluate their general perception on the contributions of English proficiency in working environment . The specific objectives were to:

1. To determine the relationship between mother tongue language and English proficiency.
2. To determine the relationship between educational background and English proficiency.
3. To determine the relationship between writing skills and graduate employment.
4. To determine the relationship between reading skills and graduate employment.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

The study examines English proficiency among UNIMAS ex-graduates and graduate employment and factors affecting their proficiency in the language. The factors identified are mother tongue language and educational background (urban or rural area). Mother tongue language is identified as the language in which respondents were brought up in their family. Educational background referred to education received by respondents during secondary level (Form 1 to Form 5) from rural or urban schools. These factors formed the independent variables for this study which were tested against the dependent variable – graduate employment (UNIMAS local graduates). These factors were also tested to see how it affects the respondent's writing skills and reading skills and finally how English proficiency relates to graduate employment. Only four demographic characteristics are selected for this study: age, gender, race and type of degree graduated in. The conceptual framework for this study is as shown in Figure 1.0.

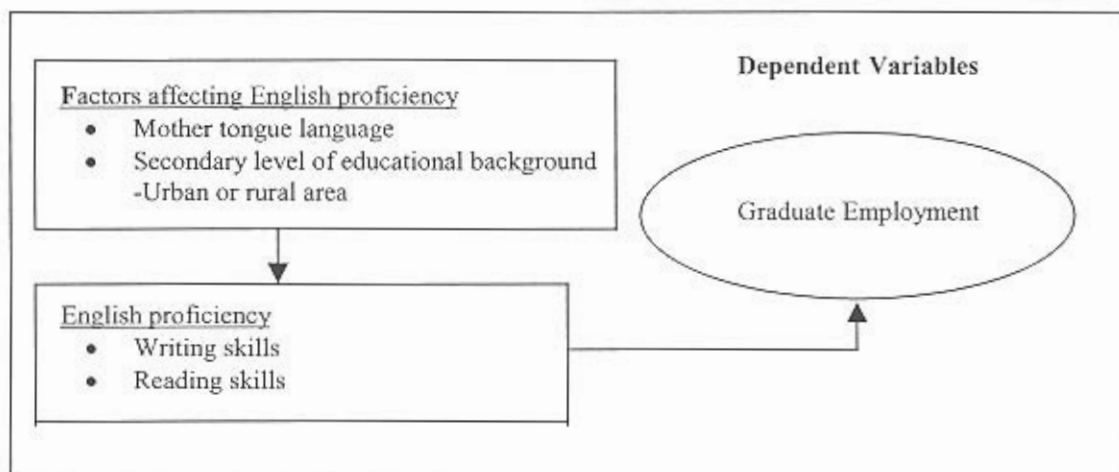


Figure 1.0: Factors affecting English proficiency and how English proficiency relates to graduate employment.

1.6 Hypothesis

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between mother tongue language and English proficiency.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between secondary level of educational background and English proficiency.

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between writing skills and graduates employment.

Ho4: There is no significant relationship between reading skills and graduates employment.

1.7 Significance Of The Study

Results from the survey will be able to benefit UNIMAS, other institutions of higher learning and prospective university graduates. The valuable feedback from 62 respondents consisting of UNIMAS graduates and executives of organization will be able to help university graduates realize the need to fully equip themselves with knowledge on basic English.

Students need to be aware that their experience of university life provides a range of opportunities that not only enable the achievement of getting a degree but also to develop the basic skills and qualities that future employers, from all sizes of organizations expect graduates to acquire within the context of employment.

Students need to be aware that dramatic changes have occurred within the graduate labour market. They need to accept that there no longer exists a traditional graduate job for all students. Employment opportunities are not confined to large organisations. A range of employment opportunities exists within large, medium and small organisations. However, one main determining factor to secure a job is proficiency in English.

The result of this study will be able to spur lecturers of higher learning institute to use English in both academic courses and curricular activities such as international public speaking events to be in tandem with market demands. A good command of English could be acquired continuously after the students graduated. Thus, lecturers are encouraged to conduct part of their lectures in English to improve the marketability of graduates. Potential graduates will have an insight into the expectation of employers and potential career benefits to be acquired with the proficiency in English language.

1.8 DEFINITION

According to The Oxford Student's Dictionary (1997, p.278), graduate is a person who holds a university degree, whilst employment (p.207) is the state of employing or being employed. Employability according to Franco Civelli (1998) is the possibility to use or employ a series of competencies and knowledge in new or different areas of organizations by an individual or organization. Williams (1997) gives its definition of fully employed as those employees who work the customary number of hours weekly (40) and who maintain continuous employment status. All fully-employed employees are eligible for all employee benefits, including group insurance, paid vacations, paid sick leave, paid holidays, etc. Self-employed identified as an individual who operates a business or profession as a sole proprietor, partner in a partnership, independent contractor, or consultant.

Cummins (1984), for example, states that the nature of language proficiency has been understood by some researchers as consisting of 64 separate language components and by others as consisting of only one global factor. Valdés and Figueroa (1994) indicate that, "what it means to know a language goes beyond simplistic views of good pronunciation, "correct" grammar, and even mastery of rules of politeness. Knowing a language and knowing how to use a language involves a mastery and control of a large number of interdependent components and elements that interact with one another and that are affected by the nature of the situation in which communication takes place. (p. 34) Oller and Damico (1991) succinctly state that the nature and specification of the elements of language proficiency have not been determined and there continues to be debate among academicians and practitioners about the definition.

English as defined by TESL Journal (1996) as the widely used language in the world. Finally, proficiency as defined by The Oxford Student's Dictionary (1997, p.495) is the quality of being skilled. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) defines English language proficiency in this way:

A fully English proficient student is able to use English to ask questions, to understand teachers, and reading materials, to test ideas, and to challenge what is being asked in the classroom. Two language skills contribute to proficiency as follows:

1. *Writing* – the ability to produce meaningful written communication in authentic contexts (e.g., an essay)
2. *Reading* - the ability to understand, comprehend and interpret text at the age and grade-appropriate level.

Canales (1994) offers an equally practical definition of English language proficiency. Her definition of writing and reading usage (proficiency) refers to how much and how well students can extract meaning from an authentic piece of writing (reading proficiency) or how much and how well a student can communicate in writing (writing proficiency).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

In 1997, The British Council found that many of the general trends that are shaping our lives can be, as we have seen, identified, monitored, and assessed using statistical surveys and forecasting models. But what of the ways in which general economic, demographic, and technological trends affect peoples' lives and, in particular, their everyday use of language? There is virtually no context in human life where language does not play an important part. Whether in employment, at home with the family, or enjoying oneself in leisure periods, language plays an intimate role in constructing relationships and identities as well as enabling people to get things done. The next section identifies selected contexts where patterns of language are changing and explores the impact of the general trends identified..

Mother Tongue Language and English Proficiency

Jack (2002) noted that in the nineteen seventies the target for learning was assumed to be native-speaker variety of English and it was the native speaker's culture, perceptions and mother tongue that were crucial in setting goals for English proficiency. English is a foreign language and mother tongue acts as a block in all the learner's language reactions, and impedes the learning of it (English) because it (mother tongue) is so firmly seated as the first language. Indeed, the mother tongue is so much a part of our mental lives and of our unreflecting consciousness, as well as our automatic responses to experience that usually we are not aware of language when we speak or listen or write. But in using English we cannot as first avoid being aware of language symbols, and of attending to words, sentence patterns and grammatical forms, instead of meaning. So to know English, students as well as teachers have to be conscious about it. One of the historical reasons for education in Malay resulted in a very big change which has caused problems, such as the drop in English proficiency in several generations of Malaysians, combined with the lack of material in Malay at higher education levels — especially in science and technology have contributed to the factor of low English proficiency (The Star, 2002).

Education and English Proficiency

Kaur (2002), found that there is a barrier between rural and urban area when it comes to learning basic English. That is the recent scenario that can be seen in our educational scene. Students of various levels either in schools or higher learning institutions are striving towards excellence in their studies. Regrettably, the education are lacking of motivation in making students to be good speakers and users of English. In the cities, people are often found speaking

English regularly among friends and family. Even in this new millennium, we can see the prosperity of the ICT era among the people. Thus there is a great demand for the International language when it comes to exploring the ICT world for information. Cyber café are increasing by the numbers in housing area or cities and teenagers are the regular customers. Thus the town folks can really grasp the idea on how significant English in their daily lives. On the other hand, people in the rural area cannot imagine the rationality of learning English, as there is no need of the language in their daily lives therefore the educational boundaries both urban and rural area contributed to the problem of acquiring English proficiency.

What role will English play outside school? English medium teaching is permitting rapid internationalization of higher education and adult training. The 'rush' to English around the world may, for example, prove to be a temporary phenomenon which cannot be sustained indefinitely. Languages other than English are likely to achieve regional importance whilst changed economic relations between native-speaking English countries and other parts of the world will alter the rationale for learning and speaking English. The goal of language teaching was to understand how sentences are used to create different kinds of meaning, to master the underlying rules for forming sentences from lower-level grammatical units such as phrases and clauses, and to practice using them as the basis for written and spoken communication.

Nabi and Bagley (1999) noted that the pace of change in the workplace has led to an increased pressure on higher education institutions (HEIs) to provide undergraduate courses that equip students with skills and attributes that will facilitate the education to employment transition and engender subsequent career progression. In relation to this, graduate recruiters frequently highlight the personal transferable skills that graduates lack, such as personal attributes, communication in written, verbal and non-verbal skills and problem solving skills, and urge universities to redress the issue rapidly (AGR, 1995). How should higher education (HE) respond to this challenge? "Preparing graduates in acquiring skills for employment is indeed one of the purposes of higher education. (Yet), given the ever-growing demands to expand the curriculum (and the recent expansion in student numbers), the challenge is to identify which skills should be integral to the teaching process in higher learning institutes and which should be facilitated outside the academic curriculum" (AGR, 1995, p. 26).

English plays an important role in the Information and Communication Age. It also prompts a rethinking approach to emphasize reading. Students must now learn to be able to apply what they have learned, to use knowledge to solve problems, and to be able to transfer learning to new situations. Educationists argue that learners need to develop effective analytical processing skills through reading, problem solving and critical thinking, and to develop technical reading skills rather than those used for literary reading. In addition information-literacy skills are needed, i.e. the skills needed to access, analyze, authenticate and apply information required from different sources and turn it into useful personal knowledge (Jack, 2002).

English Proficiency In The Workplace

Earlier we described how trends in technology, the global economy, and demography hold implications for our working lives. Here we examine the implications of these trends for English language skills required by the new globalised workforces.

Today's challenging economic situation means that it is no longer sufficient for a new graduate to have knowledge of an academic subject; increasingly it is necessary for students to gain those skills which will enhance their prospects of employment. Employability skills include the following abilities: the retrieval and handling of information; communication and presentation; planning and problem solving; and social development and interaction.

University education cannot be expected to provide students with a complete and comprehensive skills-base in preparation for future employment. Indeed, this is not what employers want or expect, since different organisations will often use different criteria for recruitment and these may frequently change in response to labour market demands (AGR, 1995). There does, however, seem to be a consensus emerging in the skills development and careers education literature which highlights the urgent need to help graduates acquire a broad range of personal self-reliance skills regardless of their particular degree discipline and that these skills will be needed by employers in the future (e.g. AGR, 1995; Binks and Exley, 1992; Brown, 1989; Green, 1990; Harvey et al., 1997).

The Department of Employment's enterprise in higher education (EHE) initiative sought to address these issues by funding research programmes in HE to identify transferable skills and competencies of self-reliance which allow students to make the successful transition from education to employment. As part of this initiative, at the University of Nottingham, Binks and Exley (1992) identified 25 specific skills as desirable graduate attributes for employment. These were classified into three groups:

- personal attributes (e.g. teamworking, time management, task prioritisation skills);
- communication attributes (e.g. written and oral skills); and
- problem-solving attributes (e.g. assessing information, decisiveness, judgement and IT skills).

Although not exhaustive, this repertoire of attributes can be viewed as indicative of the generic transferable skills - skills applicable to most areas of work - that employers are increasingly expecting graduates to possess. Supporting this, careers advisers frequently recommend the need for students to develop a variety of personal transferable skills during their undergraduate programmes. Indeed, Schofield (1996) illustrated this point convincingly by noting that an employer would tend to view an undergraduate with a second-class degree and a range transferable skills more favourably than say a more qualified postgraduate without them.

Bloch (1995) believes that if there is any international language for business, it is certainly English, and this trend is on the rise. However, whether at this level or any other, the language skill is more likely to secure the job in the first place than ensure spectacular success and progress as measured by rank and salary. This would then depend on the individual as always, but the language skill certainly opens up opportunities that would not otherwise exist: "A foreign language is not an open ticket to the position of one's dreams, but the message from the growing number of businesses looking abroad is that a graduate with language skills, particularly one with a measure of professional training, is at a definite advantage".

On the contrary, Dench (1997) reports that there have been many comments recently on the poor levels of literacy and numeracy among sections of the population, and the points made above are not new. Recent announcements in relation to education policy suggest attempts to address these issues. Colleges of further education, and some higher education institutes, also devote time to helping people improve their basic skills. The importance of these abilities will not go away and, indeed, they underlie sound ability in many of the other skills and abilities employers are seeking.

The term "personal skills" suggests something more than the existence of certain attributes in people. Examples include communication, being capable of working with others, taking responsibility, making decisions through effective reading and writing skills, negotiating and problem solving. Recent studies of employers' skill needs suggest that these types of personal skills are becoming of crucial importance across occupations and employers. Changing organizational structures, the development of a service economy and the consequent focus on

customer service, a continual drive for quality and strong competition, as well as technological developments, have all helped to drive this development.

For people entering the workforce for the first time, or re-entering the workforce, an appreciation of the importance of these personal skills is very important. These personal skills are important in influencing the effectiveness with which an individual is able to operate in a workplace, as well as being of particular importance in certain occupations. On a more individual level, personal skills will become of considerable importance if the trend towards job instability and the need to change jobs, maybe career, regularly are fulfilled. It is these abilities, and personal attitudes, which will help people to adjust to new demands and cope with change.

In Stewart and Knowles's (2000) survey, the questionnaire survey did reveal some responses that contradict what Dearing terms as being "key to the future success of graduates whatever they intend to do in later life" (Hesketh, 1998a, p. ii). Such statements made by the Dearing Report refer to the importance of four key skills: communication skills, the ability to write and read, numerical and IT skills.

The research findings appear to support the notion of transferable skills and qualities playing a key part in supporting a degree, in terms of providing graduates with the means of securing employment. The primary research suggests that, like large organisations, Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) similarly seek employees who possess transferable skills and qualities, and that a degree, on its own, is no guarantee of a job.

Indeed, Harvey *et al.* (1997, p. 63), whose research encompasses both large and small businesses, state "There are large numbers of graduates looking for jobs and employers, as we have seen, no longer recruit simply on the basis of degree status. A degree might be necessary or desirable but employers are looking for a range of other attributes when employing graduates."

Both secondary and primary research findings suggest that employers from both large and small organisations, particularly value verbal and written communication skills. He said that verbal communication was considered important because of the expectation that coherent presentations to customers would need to be made. Written communication skills were considered essential in composing a "good, well structured letter" to customers. *Skills and qualities considered important in the recruitment and selection of graduates.* The skills and qualities referred to as being important when recruiting and selecting a graduate were: oral and written communication skills. Oral and written communication skills were considered vital as everybody in the company has customer interface... "was the reasons given for graduates to possess strong verbal and written communication skills".

FitzGerald [10.p.3] explains that language issues "...are now attracting attention and resources as business and government acknowledge the importance of communication skills for effective work outcomes".

CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Procedure is an integral part of all research. It involves the methods used for collecting and assembling relevant information. Having outlined the scope of the research, I will next identifies the means adopted to collect its data:

- By scrutinizing documents
- By interviewing respondents
- By distributions of questionnaires
- By examination, analysis, etc.

Local and international journals were referred to as secondary sources of information in the study. Primary data were collected from the distribution of self-administered questionnaires to 52 local graduates from UNIMAS. About 20 sets of questionnaires were self-delivered to the respondents who are staying outside the capital city of Kuching (Petra Jaya and Matang area) and within the reach of the researcher, while the rest of 32 sets of questionnaires were posted to those staying around Kuching city.

This chapter will focus on types of research, population, research sample, sampling technique, instrument used, questionnaires formation, data collection method and data analysis.

3.2 Research Design

This is a qualitative and quantitative research that intends to uncover the relationship between variables – **independent variables** are identified factors that can affect English proficiency while **dependent variable** is graduate employment. This study explored such relationships using questionnaire survey and interview.

3.3 Population And Sample Design

The population chosen in this research involves local graduates from UNIMAS as well as executives from various organizations. For this purpose, the study has randomly chosen 62 individuals. For the purpose of questionnaires distributions, 52 local graduates are selected out of a name list provided by the UNIMAS using random sampling method, whilst 10 executives are chosen randomly from various organizations for the interview session in the research. The organizations chosen ranges from the management consultancy, banking, financial,

manufacturing, building and public works, pharmaceutical, transport, information technology, telecommunication, trading, hospitality, education and other industries were chosen.

3.4 Research Instrument

The instrument used to collect information for this research is through questionnaires. The questionnaire is tested for its levels of accuracy. For this reason, 52 local graduates from the sample size are to take this accuracy test by completing the questionnaires.

A six-page questionnaires form was designed and adapted from Hilleson (1996). There were 5 sections in the questionnaires. **Section A** identified the respondent's demographic background; **Section B** identified the respondent's employment status; **Section C** identified the respondent's mother tongue language; **Section D** identified the respondent's educational background in secondary level (either from rural or urban educational background); lastly **Section E** identified the respondent's level of English proficiency in writing (required to write a short essay) and reading (required understanding on text based questions).

3.5 Data collection procedure

A pilot test was conducted by distributing questionnaires to 10 ex-UNIMAS graduates of August 2001 in November 2002. Acting on their feedback, minor editing was done before the final questionnaires were posted to 40 ex-UNIMAS graduates who are staying outside the reach of the researcher around Kuching city. While those who are staying outside the capital city of Kuching (i.e.: Petra Jaya and Matang area) and who are within the reach of the researcher, 20 sets of questionnaires were self-delivered. While prompt replies were expected from initial postage of 50 questionnaires enclosed with self-addressed envelopes and stamps, by the end of January, only 40 sets were returned. Random personal calls were then made to improve the response rate but the results were not encouraging. Of these only 32 out of 40 sets of questionnaires were received through post delivery plus another 20 sets of questionnaires received from self-delivered, that makes a total of 52 sets of questionnaires were found to be usable for analysis. An analysis were made on the employment status of 52 graduates, it revealed that a majority of 36.5 per cent are self employed followed by 34.6 per cent are not employed and only 23.1 per cent are fully employed whilst 5.8 per cent are furthering their studies.

3.5.1 Questionnaires Formation

The purpose of questionnaires allows the researcher to cover a full scope of its respondents. There are 28 sets of questions created based on the null hypothesis and research objectives in its purpose to understand matters under study. For this study, "open-ended and closed-ended" types of questions were used in the process of evaluating the data collected. The questionnaire is divided into five sections, A, B, C, D and E. The sample size comprised of 52 graduates who were selected randomly and ranges from science cognitive and human resource faculty, business and economics faculty, social science faculty, engineering faculty, science and technology resource faculty, IT faculty and fine arts faculty. About 10 selected executives from various organizations were included in the sample that contributed to a total of 62 respondents for the study. Each questionnaire was prefaced by a covering letter that explained the purpose and importance of the survey, and provided assurances that all questionnaire responses would be treated with the strictest confidentiality. Respondents were also asked to take English proficiency test provided in the questionnaire. The tests were divided into 2 types - writing test and reading test. The tests allow the researcher to study the levels of English proficiency among

graduates and how it affects employment. The tests were adapted from the Minnesota Language Proficiency Assessment (1999).

Section A: Demography/Respondents' Background

This section investigates respondents' background that includes age, gender, race, and type of degree courses they graduated in.

Section B: Employment

This section identifies the respondent's employment status, number of interview attended before getting their first job (for those employed), the rank of importance in English proficiency required by the company before hiring them and the reasons why some are not employed. the factors that affect graduates' proficiency in English. Here, **Likert Scale System** is used in the questionnaires to make easy implications in data analysis and it is relevant to be used in psychological test as it can measure the subjective and standard behavior.

The Likert Scale System collects the feedback from the respondents and turn the data collected into identified scale/ratings, starting with 4 = very important, 3 = important, 2 = not important, 1 = irrelevant.

Section C: Mother Tongue Language

Section C identified the respondent's mother tongue language, how mother tongue language affect their usage of English and in what situations is seen most uncomfortable for them to communicate in English.

Section D: Educational Background

Section D identified the respondent's educational background in secondary level from Form 1 to Form 5 in rural or urban schools and how it affect their English proficiency.

Section E: English Proficiency Level

Section E identified the respondent's level of English proficiency in writing (required to write a short essay) and reading (required understanding on text based questions) This section will also determine the levels of English proficiency among graduates in three aspects: writing skills (required to write a short essay) and reading skills (understanding of text based questions). The result on writing and reading tests were evaluated by the language experts in English using the Likert Scale System starting with 1 = excellent, 2 = good, 3 = moderate, 4 = poor. The next part of the questionnaire was the conclusion part to which respondents were asked to rank their overall English proficiency level. The feedback and data collected from the respondents were turn into identified scale/ratings using Likert Scale System, starting with 1 = very well, 2 = good, 3 = okay, 4 = not good. The data collected will then be analyzed to identify the reliability of English proficiency in graduate employment. It will also detect the data if it has discrete relationship between the importance of English in employment.

3.5.2 The Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was designed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions and comprised five distinct sections (Sections A, B, C, D and E). Factual and opinion-related questions were incorporated into the design of each of the sections contained within the questionnaire and closed and open-ended questions were used. Respondents were required to complete all sections of the questionnaire, irrespective of whether or not they are proficient in English. Section E of the questionnaire included the English Proficiency Level Test that is discussed in more detail below.

English Proficiency Test

The English Proficiency Test (EPT) is a set of tests designed to measure the grammar in writing skills and reading skills of people who are not native speakers of English. The tests are adapted from the Minnesota Language Proficiency Assessment (1999). It consists of two sections: Writing test and Reading test.

The Writing Test was designed to assess the respondent's abilities on grammar and syntax or a basic literacy test. The respondents were asked to engage seriously with a topic of intellectual interest and to produce a clear well-reasoned essay that reflects their understanding of the issues.

The Reading Test was designed to assess the respondent's abilities to read and understand texts given. They were also tested on their ability to understand the meaning of written English at word, phrase sentence, paragraphs and whole text level. As Bartholomae and Petrosky (1990) contend, improvement in reading skill depends most on what students do with what they read, that is, on how they engage the text.

The results from the two tests were evaluated using an evaluation form adapted from Hee-Jung Jung, 2001 (please refer to Appendix A) based on Likert Scale System, an overall score obtained was later assessed using level of ability adapted from the Canadian Language Benchmarks (2002) to describe the skill levels of the respondents in English proficiency (please refer to Appendix B).

3.5.3 The Interview Design

The second phase of the research design consisted of conducting 10 informally interviews, five with the executives from the government sectors and another five with executives from the private sectors of different organizations, namely the management consultancy, banking, financial, manufacturing, building and public works, pharmaceutical, transport, information technology, telecommunication, trading, hospitality, education and other industries all of whom currently recruit graduates. The key reason for supplementing the postal survey with interviews was to explore "the how and why". The questionnaire had been designed to provide an insight into what are the skills considered important when recruiting graduates, but the design did not address the question of why these skills were deemed to be important. As Burgess (1982) states, "the interview provides the opportunity for the researcher to probe deeply to uncover new clues, open up new dimensions of a problem and to secure vivid, accurate inclusive accounts that are based on personal experience."

The interview was planned adopting a semi-structured approach, i.e. only the main areas for question being pre-planned. However, as the first phase of the primary research had been more geared towards a structured approach, it was considered that conducting a semi-structured interview would provide more in-depth, and meaningful data, with the prime aim of the researcher not influencing the interviewee to the same extent as the questionnaire. A

decision was taken, therefore, not to prompt the interviewees by providing the skills and qualities listing, which had formed Section B on the questionnaire, at the beginning of the interview.

Interviews were conducted individually, each lasting close to half an hour. Interviewees were given maximum opportunity (and encouraged) to develop their thoughts freely and open-endedly, but care was taken by the researcher that adequate in-depth information was obtained about:

1. Which skills and qualities are considered important by recruiters?
2. Why are the skills and qualities cited considered to be important?
3. What recruitment and selection processes are adopted by recruiters to assess those skills and qualities that are considered important.

Other raised questions will be:

1. Identify reasons why some organizations do not hire those with lack English proficiency skills.

The interview will required respondents to indicate which methods of selection they use (or would use if they were ever to recruit graduates), in order to assess whether a potential graduate recruit possessed the skills which they had rated highly in previous statement of the interview session. The last question in the interview will provide the opportunity to gather some qualitative data by asking respondents to comment on the future of these skills that are considered important in employment. The method of semi-structured interviews, using a small sample, attempted to focus on potential variation in meanings in order to understand, in more depth, what was happening in the area of graduate recruitment and selection. The interviews, therefore, attempted to establish different views in relation to the importance of English proficiency.

3.6 Pilot Studies

The **Statistical Package for Social Sciences Programme (SPSS/PC+)** was used to summarize data obtained from the survey. Frequency distributions describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents and their respective employment status. Additional statistical tools could not be adopted to provide additional information from the data due to the limited sample size. According to Jaccord and Becker (1997), the level of accuracy and trust that is acceptable is +0.5. If it is less than 0.5, the formation of the questionnaires will be therefore valued again.

3.7 Data Collection

The survey method is utilized to obtain primary data in the study. A pilot test was conducted by distributing questionnaires to 10 local graduates of August 2001, UNIMAS. Minor editing will be done before the final questionnaires were either self-delivered or posted to 52 local graduates. An average of 10 different executives under each different sectors or industries were selected to participate in the survey. Random personal phone calls was made to respondents by the researcher to improve the response rate regarding the questionnaires. In order to get valuable information, this study has carried out certain investigations to find